CHAPTER XXVII

LIFE

Mount Dunstan, walking through the park next morning on his way to the vicarage, just after post time, met Mr. Penzance himself coming to make an equally early call at the Mount. Each of them had a letter in his hand, and each met the other's glance with a smile.

"G. Selden," Mount Dunstan said. "And yours?"

"G. Selden also," answered the vicar. "Poor young fellow, what ill-luck. And yet--is it ill-luck? He says not."

"He tells me it is not," said Mount Dunstan. "And I agree with him."

Mr. Penzance read his letter aloud.

"DEAR SIR:

"This is to notify you that owing to my bike going back on me when going down hill, I met with an accident in Stornham Park. Was cut about the head and leg broken. Little Willie being far from home and mother, you can see what sort of fix he'd been in if it hadn't been for the kindness of Reuben S. Vanderpoel's daughters--Miss Bettina and her sister Lady

Anstruthers. The way they've had me taken care of has been great. I've been under a nurse and doctor same as if I was Albert Edward with appendycytus (I apologise if that's not spelt right). Dear Sir, this is to say that I asked Miss Vanderpoel if I should be butting in too much if I dropped a line to ask if you could spare the time to call and see me. It would be considered a favour and appreciated by

"G. SELDEN,

"Delkoff Typewriter Co. Broadway.

"P. S. Have already sold three Delkoffs to Miss Vanderpoel."

"Upon my word," Mr. Penzance commented, and his amiable fervour quite glowed, "I like that queer young fellow--I like him. He does not wish to 'butt in too much.' Now, there is rudimentary delicacy in that. And what a humorous, forceful figure of speech! Some butting animal--a goat, I seem to see, preferably--forcing its way into a group or closed circle of persons."

His gleeful analysis of the phrase had such evident charm for him that Mount Dunstan broke into a shout of laughter, even as G. Selden had done at the adroit mention of Weber & Fields.

"Shall we ride over together to see him this morning? An hour with G.

Selden, surrounded by the atmosphere of Reuben S. Vanderpoel, would be a cheering thing," he said.

"It would," Mr. Penzance answered. "Let us go by all means. We should not, I suppose," with keen delight, "be 'butting in' upon Lady Anstruthers too early?" He was quite enraptured with his own aptness. "Like G. Selden, I should not like to 'butt in,'" he added.

The scent and warmth and glow of a glorious morning filled the hour. Combining themselves with a certain normal human gaiety which surrounded the mere thought of G. Selden, they were good things for Mount Dunstan. Life was strong and young in him, and he had laughed a big young laugh, which had, perhaps tended to the waking in him of the feeling he was suddenly conscious of--that a six-mile ride over a white, tree-dappled, sunlit road would be pleasant enough, and, after all, if at the end of the gallop one came again upon that other in whom life was strong and young, and bloomed on rose-cheek and was the far fire in the blue deeps of lovely eyes, and the slim straightness of the fair body, why would it not be, in a way, all to the good? He had thought of her on more than one day, and felt that he wanted to see her again.

"Let us go," he answered Penzance. "One can call on an invalid at any time. Lady Anstruthers will forgive us."

In less than an hour's time they were on their way. They laughed and

talked as they rode, their horses' hoofs striking out a cheerful ringing accompaniment to their voices. There is nothing more exhilarating than the hollow, regular ring and click-clack of good hoofs going well over a fine old Roman road in the morning sunlight. They talked of the junior assistant salesman and of Miss Vanderpoel. Penzance was much pleased by the prospect of seeing "this delightful and unusual girl." He had heard stories of her, as had Lord Westholt. He knew of old Doby's pipe, and of Mrs. Welden's respite from the Union, and though such incidents would seem mere trifles to the dweller in great towns, he had himself lived and done his work long enough in villages to know the village mind and the scale of proportions by which its gladness and sadness were measured. He knew more of all this than Mount Dunstan could, since Mount
Dunstan's existence had isolated itself, from rather gloomy choice. But as he rode, Mount Dunstan knew that he liked to hear these things. There was the suggestion of new life and new thought in them, and such suggestion was good for any man--or woman, either--who had fallen into living in a dull, narrow groove.

"It is the new life in her which strikes me," he said. "She has brought wealth with her, and wealth is power to do the good or evil that grows in a man's soul; but she has brought something more. She might have come here and brought all the sumptuousness of a fashionable young beauty, who drove through the village and drew people to their windows, and made clodhoppers scratch their heads and pull their forelocks, and children bob curtsies and stare. She might have come and gone and left a

mind-dazzling memory and nothing else. A few sovereigns tossed here and there would have earned her a reputation--but, by gee! to quote Selden--she has begun LIVING with them, as if her ancestors had done it for six hundred years. And what I see is that if she had come without a penny in her pocket she would have done the same thing." He paused a pondering moment, and then drew a sharp breath which was an exclamation
in itself. "She's Life!" he said. "She's Life itself! Good God! what a thing it is for a man or woman to be Life--instead of a mass of tissue and muscle and nerve, dragged about by the mere mechanism of living!"

Penzance had listened seriously.

"What you say is very suggestive," he commented. "It strikes me as true, too. You have seen something of her also, at least more than I have."

"I did not think these things when I saw her--though I suppose I felt them unconsciously. I have reached this way of summing her up by processes of exclusion and inclusion. One hears of her, as you know yourself, and one thinks her over."

"You have thought her over?"

"A lot," rather grumpily. "A beautiful female creature inevitably gives an unbeautiful male creature something to think of--if he is not otherwise actively employed. I am not. She has become a sort of dawning

relief to my hopeless humours. Being a low and unworthy beast, I am sometimes resentful enough of the unfairness of things. She has too much."

When they rode through Stornham village they saw signs of work already done and work still in hand. There were no broken windows or palings or hanging wicket gates; cottage gardens had been put in order, and there were evidences of such cheering touches as new bits of window curtain and strong-looking young plants blooming between them. So many small, but necessary, things had been done that the whole village wore the aspect of a place which had taken heart, and was facing existence in a hopeful spirit. A year ago Mount Dunstan and his vicar riding through it had been struck by its neglected and dispirited look.

As they entered the hall of the Court Miss Vanderpoel was descending the staircase. She was laughing a little to herself, and she looked pleased when she saw them.

"It is good of you to come," she said, as they crossed the hall to the drawing-room. "But I told him I really thought you would. I have just been talking to him, and he was a little uncertain as to whether he had assumed too much."

"As to whether he had 'butted in,'" said Mr. Penzance. "I think he must have said that."

"He did. He also was afraid that he might have been 'too fresh.'" answered Betty.

"On our part," said Mr. Penzance, with gentle glee, "we hesitated a moment in fear lest we also might appear to be 'butting in.'"

Then they all laughed together. They were laughing when Lady Anstruthers entered, and she herself joined them. But to Mount Dunstan, who felt her to be somehow a touching little person, there was manifest a tenderness in her feeling for G. Selden. For that matter, however, there was something already beginning to be rather affectionate in the attitude of each of them. They went upstairs to find him lying in state upon a big sofa placed near a window, and his joy at the sight of them was a genuine, human thing. In fact, he had pondered a good deal in secret on the possibility of these swell people thinking he had "more than his share of gall" to expect them to remember him after he passed on his junior assistant salesman's way. Reuben S. Vanderpoel's daughters were of the highest of his Four Hundred, but they were Americans, and Americans were not as a rule so "stuck on themselves" as the English. And here these two swells came as friendly as you please. And that nice old chap that was a vicar, smiling and giving him "the glad hand"!

Betty and Mount Dunstan left Mr. Penzance talking to the convalescent after a short time. Mount Dunstan had asked to be shown the gardens. He wanted to see the wonderful things he had heard had been already done to them.

They went down the stairs together and passed through the drawing-room into the pleasure grounds. The once neglected lawns had already been mown and rolled, clipped and trimmed, until they spread before the eye huge measures of green velvet; even the beds girdling and adorning them were brilliant with flowers.

"Kedgers!" said Betty, waving her hand. "In my ignorance I thought we must wait for blossoms until next year; but it appears that wonders can be brought all ready to bloom for one from nursery gardens, and can be made to grow with care--and daring--and passionate affection. I have seen Kedgers turn pale with anguish as he hung over a bed of transplanted things which seemed to droop too long. They droop just at first, you know, and then they slowly lift their heads, slowly, as if to listen to a Voice calling--calling. Once I sat for quite a long time before a rose, watching it. When I saw it BEGIN to listen, I felt a little trembling pass over my body. I seemed to be so strangely near to such a strange thing. It was Life--Life coming back--in answer to what we cannot hear."

She had begun lightly, and then her voice had changed. It was very quiet at the end of her speaking. Mount Dunstan simply repeated her last words.

"To what we cannot hear."

"One feels it so much in a garden," she said. "I have never lived in a garden of my own. This is not mine, but I have been living in it--with Kedgers. One is so close to Life in it--the stirring in the brown earth, the piercing through of green spears, that breaking of buds and pouring forth of scent! Why shouldn't one tremble, if one thinks? I have stood in a potting shed and watched Kedgers fill a shallow box with damp rich mould and scatter over it a thin layer of infinitesimal seeds; then he moistens them and carries them reverently to his altars in a greenhouse. The ledges in Kedgers' green-houses are altars. I think he offers prayers before them. Why not? I should. And when one comes to see them, the moist seeds are swelled to fulness, and when one comes again they are bursting. And the next time, tiny green things are curling outward. And, at last, there is a fairy forest of tiniest pale green stems and leaves. And one is standing close to the Secret of the World! And why should not one prostrate one's self, breathing softly--and touching one's awed forehead to the earth?"

Mount Dunstan turned and looked at her--a pause in his step--they were walking down a turfed path, and over their heads meeting branches of new leaves hung. Something in his movement made her turn and pause also.

They both paused--and quite unknowingly.

"Do you know," he said, in a low and rather unusual voice, "that as we were on our way here, I said of you to Penzance, that you were Life--YOU!"

For a few seconds, as they stood so, his look held her--their eyes involuntarily and strangely held each other. Something softly glowing in the sunlight falling on them both, something raining down in the song of a rising skylark trilling in the blue a field away, something in the warmed incense of blossoms near them, was calling--calling in the Voice, though they did not know they heard. Strangely, a splendid blush rose in a fair flood under her skin. She was conscious of it, and felt a second's amazed impatience that she should colour like a schoolgirl suspecting a compliment. He did not look at her as a man looks who has made a pretty speech. His eyes met hers straight and thoughtfully, and he repeated his last words as he had before repeated hers.

"That YOU were Life--you!"

The bluebells under water were for the moment incredibly lovely. Her feeling about the blush melted away as the blush itself had done.

"I am glad you said that!" she answered. "It was a beautiful thing to say. I have often thought that I should like it to be true."

"It is true," he said.

Then the skylark, showering golden rain, swept down to earth and its nest in the meadow, and they walked on.

She learned from him, as they walked together, and he also learned from her, in a manner which built for them as they went from point to point, a certain degree of delicate intimacy, gradually, during their ramble, tending to make discussion and question possible. Her intelligent and broad interest in the work on the estate, her frank desire to acquire such practical information as she lacked, aroused in himself an interest he had previously seen no reason that he should feel. He realised that his outlook upon the unusual situation was being illuminated by an intelligence at once brilliant and fine, while it was also full of nice shading. The situation, of course, WAS unusual. A beautiful young sister-in-law appearing upon the dark horizon of a shamefully ill-used estate, and restoring, with touches of a wand of gold, what a fellow who was a blackguard should have set in order years ago. That Lady Anstruthers' money should have rescued her boy's inheritance instead of being spent upon lavish viciousness went without saying. What Mount Dunstan was most struck by was the perfect clearness, and its combination with a certain judicial good breeding, in Miss Vanderpoel's view of the matter. She made no confidences, beautifully candid as her manner was, but he saw that she clearly understood the thing she was doing, and that if her sister had had no son she would not have done this, but something totally different. He had an idea that Lady Anstruthers would have been swiftly and lightly swept back to New York, and Sir Nigel left to his own devices, in which case Stornham Court and its village would gradually have crumbled to decay. It was for Sir Ughtred Anstruthers the place was being restored. She was quite clear on the matter of entail. He wondered at first--not unnaturally--how a girl

had learned certain things she had an obviously clear knowledge of. As they continued to converse he learned. Reuben S. Vanderpoel was without doubt a man remarkable not only in the matter of being the owner of vast wealth. The rising flood of his millions had borne him upon its strange surface a thinking, not an unthinking being--in fact, a strong and fine intelligence. His thousands of miles of yearly journeying in his sumptuous private car had been the means of his accumulating not merely added gains, but ideas, points of view, emotions, a human outlook worth counting as an asset. His daughter, when she had travelled with him, had seen and talked with him of all he himself had seen. When she had not been his companion she had heard from him afterwards all best worth hearing. She had become--without any special process--familiar with the technicalities of huge business schemes, with law and commerce and political situations. Even her childish interest in the world of enterprise and labour had been passionate. So she had acquired--inevitably, while almost unconsciously--a remarkable education.

"If he had not been HIMSELF he might easily have grown tired of a little girl constantly wanting to hear things--constantly asking questions," she said. "But he did not get tired. We invented a special knock on the door of his private room. It said, 'May I come in, father?' If he was busy he answered with one knock on his desk, and I went away. If he had time to talk he called out, 'Come, Betty,' and I went to him. I used to sit upon the floor and lean against his knee. He had a beautiful way of stroking my hair or my hand as he talked. He trusted me. He told me of

great things even before he had talked of them to men. He knew I would never speak of what was said between us in his room. That was part of his trust. He said once that it was a part of the evolution of race, that men had begun to expect of women what in past ages they really only expected of each other."

Mount Dunstan hesitated before speaking.

"You mean--absolute faith--apart from affection?"

"Yes. The power to be quite silent, even when one is tempted to speak--if to speak might betray what it is wiser to keep to one's self because it is another man's affair. The kind of thing which is good faith among business men. It applies to small things as much as to large, and to other things than business."

Mount Dunstan, recalling his own childhood and his own father, felt again the pressure of the remote mental suggestion that she had had too much, a childhood and girlhood like this, the affection and companionship of a man of large and ordered intelligence, of clear and judicial outlook upon an immense area of life and experience. There was no cause for wonder that her young womanhood was all it presented to himself, as well as to others. Recognising the shadow of resentment in his thought, he swept it away, an inward sense making it clear to him that if their positions had been reversed, she would have been more generous than himself.

He pulled himself together with an unconscious movement of his shoulders. Here was the day of early June, the gold of the sun in its morning, the green shadows, the turf they walked on together, the skylark rising again from the meadow and showering down its song. Why think of anything else. What a line that was which swept from her chin down her long slim throat to its hollow! The colour between the velvet of her close-set lashes--the remembrance of her curious splendid blush--made the man's lost and unlived youth come back to him. What did it matter whether she was American or English--what did it matter whether she was insolently rich or beggarly poor? He would let himself go and forget all but the pleasure of the sight and hearing of her.

So as they went they found themselves laughing together and talking without restraint. They went through the flower and kitchen gardens; they saw the once fallen wall rebuilt now with the old brick; they visited the greenhouses and came upon Kedgers entranced with business, but enraptured at being called upon to show his treasures. His eyes, turning magnetised upon Betty, revealed the story of his soul. Mount Dunstan remarked that when he spoke to her of his flowers it was as if there existed between them the sympathy which might be engendered between two who had sat up together night after night with delicate children.

"He's stronger to-day, miss," he said, as they paused before a new wonderful bloom. "What he's getting now is good for him. I had to change

his food, miss, but this seems all right. His colour's better."

Betty herself bent over the flower as she might have bent over a child. Her eyes softened, she touched a leaf with a slim finger, as delicately as if it had been a new-born baby's cheek. As Mount Dunstan watched her he drew a step nearer to her side. For the first time in his life he felt the glow of a normal and simple pleasure untouched by any bitterness.